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Losing Andrew

BY VJOHNSON – SEPTEMBER 18, 2014

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By Jennifer Zingalie, Naval Hospital Guam Public Affairs

Many times, people choose a career path in the medical field because they want to help others, but Hospital Corpsman Amanda Odegard, a Behavioral Health Technician, who works in Naval Hospital Guam's Mental Health Department, never dreamed it would be her career that would help her during her darkest hours.

It's a story that begins like many others, a home town girl meets a home town boy and they quickly fall in love. But in this case, although her and Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Andrew Sanders were from the state of North Carolina they didn't meet until after they joined the Navy and were stationed in the heart of the Pacific, on the remote island of Guam. The two became inseparable, spending a good deal of their time together doing what many young couples do, hitting local restaurants, site seeing and just hanging out.



However, the couple didn't always do everything together. Andrew enjoyed the outdoors, often going on local hikes, known as Boonie Stomps, and running in many of the local races that take place on the island. In fact, it was at one of these races that Amanda would receive her last message from Andrew, a simple text that read, "Done with the race."

Because Amanda had volunteered to work at one of the water stations along the course they planned to meet up after the race. When she was finished she texted him to let him know, but she didn't hear back from him. Several hours passed, she tried to call him, but still there was no response.

Tragically, between finishing volunteering and messaging him, Andrew had crossed the finish line soon after passed



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out. When his friends noticed him lying unconscious they immediately called for help and began performing lifesaving efforts. He was taken to the hospital where resuscitative efforts continued, but ultimately was unsuccessful and he was pronounced dead.

Not knowing what had happened to him, Amanda headed into work the next morning for what she thought would be a normal day. When she arrived her chief petty officer called her into an office to tell her the sad news.

"I immediately burst into tears—and I tried to get an idea of what had happened and I sat in there for a little while," she said. "It didn't feel real, I couldn't believe it was happening."

Many thoughts ran through her head, "Why didn't anyone tell me?" "Why didn't I suspect anything when I saw the ambulance drive by my barracks?" "What happened?" "How could this happen?" Not wanting to be alone, she spent the rest of the day at a friend's house.

As a behavioral health tech, she was trained to help people use their coping skills when suffering from similar situations.

"Everything I had learned, about coping, all of that went out the window when it happened. That night, when I went home, I cried all night, I did not sleep at all. It was probably the worst night I've ever had actually."

Over the next several days Amanda knew people were doing their best to be supportive, but in her heart she felt nothing could be said to take her hurt away. She flew back to the states for Andrew's funeral.

"Going to the funeral was extremely helpful and I'm very glad I went. I don't regret it at all. A lot of the Marines and Sailors Andrew was stationed with at Camp Lejeune drove up for the funeral. The whole church was full, it rained that day but everyone was out there anyway," she said.

As the months went by Amanda continued to grieve.

"Andrew had a huge personality, he changed my life. Before I met him I was depressed and sad a lot, and would ask myself why I ever joined the military. He on the other hand was always optimistic about everything; he would have his moments, too.

"But after he died all I kept thinking was, 'wow, I can't believe he brought me so much joy and now he is gone—it's like I'm back or worse than I was before.'"

Not wanting her sorrow to consume her, she sought help from a mental health provider in her department.

"They helped me process my emotions a lot. We can often have trouble deciphering our own emotions, thinking 'why does this have to happen?' or 'why do I have to feel this?' It helped me a lot and I don't regret going."

"I didn't even care if going meant I would ruin my career—experiencing a loss like that, I had to talk to someone," she said. "Andrew was the friend I would normally talk to, we spent all of our time together and then he wasn't there anymore, I couldn't talk to him—so I found someone else."

Amanda will be the first to tell you that the feelings of hurt did not quickly or easily go away.

"It made me angry when some people couldn't understand why I was so upset even a few months later. Some people thought I would be over it in a month or two. You learn to cope, but you never get over it," she said.

She believes, that even in death, just as in life, Andrew's, bright smile and positive attitude was there for her.

"One night I had a dream and he was in it and the next day I felt like a changed person," she said. "It was pretty amazing. I think it was a message; it was definitely a game changer. After that I started getting out again, doing more stuff, being happier. I feel like I am the happiest I have ever been."

Her healing began slowly; she started doing more things like going to the movies with friends or volunteering.

"Making myself go out, was challenging but it was helpful," she said.

Amanda has found solace in simple, everyday things, like cooking and baking where she's able to focus her thoughts on gathering and measuring ingredients and putting together delicious recipes.

"I still see his pictures sometimes and I can't believe he's gone. I still have those days where I don't want to get out of bed. I still drive around to the places on the island that we went to and I still get sad, but it isn't like the overwhelming sadness it was before," she explained. "I try to think of the good things. I can't bring him back, but I can't dwell on it even though it is still hard to understand, but I'm still here."

Amanda believes ultimately it was Andrew's optimism that made the biggest impression on her and changed her life.

"Even when things were tough for him he didn't complain, he always came back to work the next day with a big

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smile. He would do his best; even when he would get frustrated and stressed out he'd come back the next day ready to work again," she explained.

She also believes in the importance of reaching out when faced with a situation or emotions that someone may be having a hard time coping with. "In the mental health department we provide cognitive behavioral therapy, which is about changing the way you think, which will change the way you feel," she said. I find when people decide to come in to get help, they are usually glad they did."



About vjohnson

- *Tyson Finn*

Great article. I miss him too, he was a fantastic person and friend.